DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 372 SP 027 500

AUTHOR Flinders, David J.
TITLE Being an Ethical Critic: A Practical Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (70th; San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Codes of Ethics; *Educational Research; Research Needs; *Research Problems; Social Science Research

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism. Three ethical criteria commonly used in social research--informed consent, avoidance of harm to participants, and confidentiality--are identified and applied to a particular case of eductional criticism in a study conducted on teacher coping strategies. The paper argues that the conventional ethics of social research fail to provide an adequate ethical basis for the practice of educational criticism. Alternative ethical guidelines for criticism and for qualitative research in general are suggested. (CB)

Presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Symposium on Ethical Concerns in Qualitative Research, April 1986.

BEING AN ETHICAL CRITIC: A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

David J. Flinders

Stanford University

Research ethics have not been a popular topic at annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association. Perhaps this is because many AERA members identify their professional ethics with one of the social sciences which contribute to educational inquiry. We may locate formal codes of ethics within disciplines such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology. Yet even if we assume that researchers are well trained in the ethics of social science, we may still wish to raise ethical concerns which hold particular relevance for education.

This paper explores the ethics of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism. My plan is to briefly identify three ethical criteria commonly used in social research: 1) informed consent, 2) avoidance of harm to participants, and 3) confidentiality. These criteria will then be applied to a particular case: educational criticism used in a study I conducted on teacher coping strategies. Throughout this discussion, I will argue that the conventional ethics of social research fail to provide an adequate ethical basis for the practice of educational criticism. Although I suggest alternative ethical guidelines for criticism and for qualitative research in general, my purpose is to help clarify issues rather than prescribe a set of rules or "code" of ethics. As Joan E. Sieber (1982:v) notes:

> .. no ethical dilemma in social research is solved once and for all, and no procedure or value orientation, however broad and sophisticated, is acceptable to all or universally effective in confronting potential problems.

Informed consent, avoidance of harm, and confidentiality are primary ethical concerns in social research. Informed consent is based on the subjects' right to self-determination (Reynolds, 1979:86-8). The process of securing informed consent depends on both the ability of researchers to inform subjects, and on the ability of subjects to use information in making their own decision whether or not to participate in research. Avoidance of harm is founded on the principle of beneficence (Sieber, 1980:54). Traditionally, this principle has been approached from at least two perspectives. A teleological perspective focuses on the potential consequenses of research for individuals, groups, and society at large. A deontological approach considers rights and obligations in addition to consequences (Bunda, 1985:26-9). Confidentiality is based on the subjects' right to privacy. It not only protects subjects from potential harm or embarrassment, but also recognizes that some aspects of human life are not open to public scrutiny (von Hoffman, 1982:38).

In social research, it is not always possible to secure informed consent, avoid potential harm, or protect individual privacy. Nevertheless, these criteria serve a number of functions. They provide a framework for raising ethical questions and suggest research procedures which help minimize ethical problems. Are these criteria also useful to qualitative research in general, and to educational criticism in particular?

In order to address this question, I will draw upon my experience as an educational critic. This experience focuses on a study of six teachers working in two high schools. Overall, I spent more than 200 hours over a period of five months with these teacners. During this time, I talked with teachers informally, observed their teaching, conducted a series of taped interviews,

and collected written documents such as course syllabi and sample curriculum materials. I then used this information to write six educational criticisms which focus on the work experience and coping strategies of each participating teacher. In form, these criticisms are much like qualitative case studies; they are written in a narrative style and rely on vivid descriptions of individual teachers and the conditions under which they work.

My aim in conducting this research was not simply to describe the teacher's work experience, but also to explain and judge the quality of that experience. Making such a judgment points to the evaluative aspect of criticism. In everyday language, the term "criticism" often carries negative connotations which imply harsh or unfavorable judgment. Yet these negative connotations are in no way inherent to the formal modes of criticism used in either art or education. In describing the goals of criticism, Elliot Eisner (1985:217) argues that the critic's primary task is not simply to issue judgment, but rather to render the qualities of an object or event in ways which help others perceive it more deeply. This is not an easy task, yet, if anything, it embraces an optimistic rather than pessimistic outlook for those who seek to better understand classroom life.

As a researcher/critic, informed consent was one of my first practical concerns. In an effort to secure informed consent, I explained to potential participants the purpose of my study, the voluntary nature of their cooperation, the types of information I planned to collect, how I intended to use this information, and the forms of feedback I hoped to provide. This process was facilitated in two ways. First, my study did not involve intentional deception or covert behavior on my part. Second, my primary participants were all mature adults, well able to use the information I provided in reaching a decision. However, my ability to secure informed

consent was also constrained. First, educational criticism was largely unfamiliar to my participants. Had I been able to represent myself as an anthropologist or sociologist, most of my participants would have had at least some idea of what I was about. Yet this was their first experience with an educational critic, and they had to accept my good intentions on faith. Furthermore, the particular focus of my educational criticisms largely depended on themes which emerged throughout the course of the study. This made it difficult to pre-specify much of the information that I would eventually make public. Such ambiguity is common to all forms of research. If there was no ambiguity involved, there would be no reason to do the research. However, ambiguity during the early stages of fieldwork tends to be much greater for the educational critic and qualitative researcher than it is for someone conducting a field experiment or administering a questionnaire.

These constraints on informed consent forced me to recognize that my participants' initial commitment to the study was based primarily on trust. Given these circumstances, my ethical responsibilities extended far beyond the formal principles and procedures of informed consent. In practical terms, these additional responsibilities required that I anticipate and respond to the concerns of participants both before and after their decision to take part in the research. Murray Wax (1982) and Myron Glazer (1982) argue that reciprocity, as opposed to informed consent, provides the ethical basis for fieldwork. Glazer (1982:68) points out the basic dimensions of researcher/participant reciprocity:

> In essence, reciprocity requires the careful formulation of agreements, the willingness to exchange goods and favors for information, the understanding that others may both assist us and attempt to use us for their own gains, the likelihood that we will be expected to serve as advocates and thus go beyond the requirements of putting our thoughts down on the printed page, and the necessity to share both the joy and fun and the pain and loss of those we hope to understand.

The danger of informed consent in the absence of reciprocity is that it may foster an illusion that critics have fulfilled their ethical responsibilities even when they have not. Should problems develop after informed consent has been secured, critics may be tempted to disregard their ethical responsibilities by claiming that participants knew full well what they were getting into. Yet rarely do participants (or critics) initially realize exactly what they are "getting into." Thus, critics cannot rely on informed consent alone to provide adequate ethical guidelines for their work.

In comparison with informed consent, reciprocity raises the question of what participants receive in exchange for their participation. Early in my study, I promised participants feedback relevant to their own teaching in return for their coopertation and assistance. However, my participants did not seem to value this feedback as highly as they valued the opportunity to talk with someone who held a genuine interest in their work. After an interview with one participating teacher, he jokingly suggested that I charge him on an hourly basis for this "therapy." This teacher rarely had the opportunity to discuss his work with someone he considered a peer, and this experience offered him both emotional release and moral support. Although it is sometimes difficult to anticipate the needs of participants, educational critics hold an ethical obligation to accept the responsibilities as well as the privileges which accompany the reciprocal relationships they establish in the course of their work.

Avoidance of harm represents a second area of ethical concern in social research. In this area, educational criticism may seem relatively benign compared with forms of research which require an experimental treatment or planned intervention. Irresponsible disclosure of information by a critic may threaten participants' self-esteem as well as their professional standing, and critics do have an ethical responsibility not to report information which would

place their participants at risk. Yet this responsibility again falls short of providing adequate ethical guidelines for the practice of criticism. For example, we may still feel uneasy about criticism which portrays individuals in a boldly negative light, regardless of whether of not such a portrayal actually does harm. Such criticism betrays those who have provided information to the critic in good faith. As Joan Cassell (1982) argues in the case of fieldwork, educational critics have a responsibility not to wrong participants in addition to their responsibility not to harm them. Cassell also suggests that potential wrong, as opposed to potential harm, is best considered on the basis of the Kantian imperative that people be treated as ends in themselves, and never solely as means. To wrong participants (or to treat them only as a means) undermines their autonomy and violates norms of reciprocity.

One might expect that the critic's responsibilities not to wrong participants weighs most heavily in the reporting of information. In my own research, however, the greatest danger of wronging participants came during the initial stages. In planning the study, for example, I was often preoccupied with "means oriented" questions such as: "How will I persuade teachers to volunteer?" and "Will they be willing to provide access to the information I need?" These were reasonable questions to consider, yet they were framed within the context of how the study would benefit individual teachers in particular and the teaching profession in general. The question of "who benefits" helped broaden my perspective as a critic. Where before I had been concerned with teaching styles, I soon developed a view of teachers as professionals who must actively cope with the demands of their work. This development was significant because it shifted the focus of my criticism from teacher performance to teaching constraints.

Once I began talking with individual teachers and observing their work

on a daily basis, we quickly established what approximated a peer relationship, and it became more difficult for me to treat participants solely as a means. For example, teachers often requested my help and advice during classroom visits, and I openly provided what assistance I could within the limits of our relationship. As a critic, my role in the classroom was somewhat different than the role assumed by most social scientists. I did not bring a set of instruments to my observations, nor did I consider myself an instrument. My goal was to learn, rather than to measure, and this required that I establish a relationship with my participants based on cooperation and mutual assistance.

What prevented me from wronging participants once I had collected all my information and sat down to write my criticisms? The adage "out of sight, out of mind" suggests a danger that critics may report information which makes their criticism more interesting to read, but which is neither essential to their interpretation nor true to the spirit of researcher/participant reciprocity. First, the close relationships I established in the field, if anything, urged me to write criticisms which are both penetrating and compassionate toward my participants and their profession. Second, my writing was tempered by the knowledge that participants would have access to the criticisms based on their work. Early in the study, I promised to provide each participant with a copy of the particular criticism that focused on their teaching. This decision was based on rather traditional ethics. Had I been in the teacher's place, I would have wanted access to the criticism that I made possible.

Disclosure of the critic's work to participants is not often practiced in educational criticism although I believe there are reasons why it should be. The disclosure of technical research reports is often impractical because participants may lack the specialized knowledge upon which such reports are based. Under these circumstances, the use of multiple reports is justified.

Yet educational criticism is not likely to be incomprehensible to research participants. Nor do educational critics typically limit their audience to an elite group of fellow critics. Rather, the critic hopes to in some way inform educational practice, and this usually requires writing to a rather broad audience.

Disclosure to participants influenced my educational criticisms in two ways. First, I was more concerned that my descriptions accurately reflect what I had observed. As in all forms of social communication, I was not excessively blunt in describing the details of classroom life. However, neither did I "soften" descriptions in order to protect participants from the "realities" of their work. Second, disclosure to participants urged me to explain, as opposed to simply describe, classroom events. This further helped to broaden my interpretation and enhance the usefulness of the study.

Reporting information introduces additional ethical concerns related to the participants' right to privacy and the confidentiality of research findings. The participants in my study often made themselves vulnerable by unintentionally disclosing detailed information about their professional and personal lives. Thus, I felt responsible to protect the anonymity of my participants. In reporting information, for example, I used pseudonyms for all individual, school, and place names. Nevertheless, this precaution did not in a strict sense guarantee confidentiality. The vivid descriptions rendered in the study, together with its relatively small number of participants, would make it easy for anyone familiar with the participating schools to identify individuals. This increased my ethical responsibilities concerning the "fair treatment" of the information I used. Fair treatment combines principles of reciprocity and beneficence. First, it requires educational critics to make clear their purpose for using any information that is typically regarded as

private. Second, it requires critics to consider the emotional as well as intellectual impact of their work on both individuals and groups. These may not be easy requirements for the educational critic to meet. Yet they are unavoidable due to the limitations typically placed on the critic's ability to guarantee confidentiality.

I have argued that in order to provide a sound ethical basis for educational criticism, the criteria of informed consent, avoidance of harm, and confidentiality must be joined with concerns for reciprocity, avoidance of wrong, and fair treatment. Educational criticism, compared with the practice of social science research, requires the researcher to establish field relationships which are more alike our everyday professional relationships. This suggests that we assume a broad perspective on the ethics of educational criticism. Such a perspective diminishes the possibility of creating a pre-specified list of rules for the critic to follow. However, it does alert critics to the scope of potential ethical dilemmas inherent in their work, and allow for precautions which facilitate their role in collaborative research.

References

Bunda, Mary A., "Alternative systems of ethics and their application to education and evaluation." Evaluation and Program Planning, Vol. 8, 1985, pp. 25-36.

Cassell, Joan, "Harms, benefits, wrongs, and rights in fieldwork." The ethics of social research: Fieldwork, regulation, and publication, Joan E. Sieber (Ed.), New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982.

Eisner, Elliot W., The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs, 2nd ed., New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985.

Glazer, Myron, "The threat of the stranger: Vulnerability, reciprocity, and fieldwork." The ethics of social research: Fieldwork, regulation, and publication, Joan E. Sieber (Ed.), New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982.

Reynolds, Paul D., Ethical dilemmas and social science research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Sieber, Joan E., "Being ethical: Professional and personal decisions in program evaluation." New directions for program evaluation, Robert Perloff and Evelyn Perloff (Eds.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980, pp. 51-61.

Sieber, Joan E. (Ed.), The ethics of social research: Fieldwork, regulation, and publication. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982.

von Hoffman, Nicholas, The Washington Post, quoted by Donald P. Warwick, "Tearoom trade: Means and ends in social research." Social research ethics, Martin Bulmer (Ed.), New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982, pp. 38-58.

Wax, Murray L., "Research reciprocity rather than informed consent in fieldwork." The ethics of social research: Fieldwork, regulation, and publication, Joan E. Sieber (Ed.), New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982.